

SOCIAL PROTEST AND ELEMENTS OF REFORM IN ELIZABETH BARRETT

BROWNING POLITICAL POEMS: "THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN" AND

"THE RUNAWAY SLAVE AT PILGRIM'S POINT"

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the social protest and elements of socio-political reform in Elizabeth Barrett Browning political poetry, adopting content literary analysis, to scrutinize and trace the major elements of reformation portrayed in her poems. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in 1806, considered as one of the most reputed and prolific female poet of the Victorian era. Through her poems, she established herself as not intimidated woman, who expresses her views on contemporary socio-political issues as a tool of protest on the ongoing political milieu. Consequently, she wrote on issues such as industrialization, political leadership, slavery, child work, problems of women and religious controversy. Through the use of her two poems 'The Cry of the children' and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', it could be possible to affirm that her poems contributed virtually on many aspects of social behavior towards different political orientation. Consequently, she imposed on her audience and many other political activists her political and social reformation ideas, hence forcing many political groups to take stand on those issues. Through these two poems she raised the suffering of working children and the worse situation of slaves and the implicit slavery of the white women through exploitation and seduction. Barrett Browning represented the sample of women who fought for women's rights and children protection. Hence, many political activists propagated until the reformation Bills were assigned. Consequently, her poems played a vital role in urging and mobilization of the nation against corruption, slavery, exploitation of women and child work.

KEYWORDS: Social Reform, Child Work, Slavery, Infanticide, Women Rights & Reform Act

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is one of the most outstanding poetesses, who tackled the issue of socio-political reform in the realm of Victorian literature. Her commitment to writing political and social issues progressed early in her life. Elizabeth Browning inherited the role of poetry should do, from the poets of the romantic period such as Wordsworth, Shelly and Lord Byron. From these great figures, she learnt for what poetry should play in the process of social mobilization and the power of influence in the political and social reform. Barrett Browning also grew up in a family of successors in the road of fighting educational and other political rights of the people. Her father and her brother were famous politicians supporting the Whigs, which were fighting for the legal, and other social, political right for the individuals. As Avery, Simon (2006) pointed out:

Like her father and her eldest brother, she was a fervent supporter of the Whigs, the party of opposition whose political philosophy had at its heart a fundamental concern with the legal, civil, and religious rights of the

individual-rights for which Elizabeth Browning herself would spend most of her life fighting. Certainly it is possible to read her earliest writings in this context

In view of that, she used the poetry as a tool of reflecting her ideas concerning issues such as child work, women's rights and other political reformatory controversial issues. As stated above, rereading her poetry is essential to provide more findings concerning her strong stand against social injustice with special emphasis on child work, slavery and women's rights. Browning furthermore, strived to narrow the gap which was widely increasing between the poor and the rich. In this regard, Cawley, Nora(1941) stated that:(Mrs. Browning wrote about the gulf she saw widen between the poor and the rich. She noted that the existing class-strife awoke the lowest characteristics, scorn, disdain, and hate.) Elizabeth has recognized the growing distance among the social classes; particularly between the rich and the poor. The rich are increasing their richness and the poorer are increasingly deteriorating their living conditions and situations. Elizabeth Browning wrote on issues not only concerning Britain, but also she wrote poems on issues concerning the whole Europe and the world at large. She wrote poems on different occasions such as Greek democracy, Spanish and Italian revolutions and Napoleon. As pointed out by Elizabeth Woodworth (2007):

(Throughout Barrett Browning life, she wrote many poems reflecting her knowledge of political events: Greek democracy (ancient and contemporary), the Spanish revolution, Napoleon exploits, child labour, slavery, the Italian Risorgimento).

In 1860, when Barrett Browning published her most effective political poem, the "Poems Before Congress", she put her legs in the realm and stepped forward onto the political battleground and started addressing political entities, raising her poetic protest directly on political issues and putting herself among the writers who are fighting for freedom, and urging liberation movements of protest against the social and political injustice.

Browning dedicated many of her poems for the sake of the social change or sometimes termed as protest poems. In this paper, the focus will be on the two poems, "The Cry of the Children" in which, she defended the rights of children who were exploited working in factories post industrial revolution. The second poem is "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" an anti-slavery poem in which she protested the ugly face of the black slavery which was prosperous business in North America and white women slavery (through exploitation and sexual abuse) in Europe.

Barrett Browning wrote huge number of poems that are likely touching socio-political concern; but her poems were not given ample study and consideration in the realm of many political poets of the Victorian era. Hence, it's essential to reread her poems to explore her poetical debate against the many of the political issues that were prevalent at that age. The view is also stated by Marjorie Stone (1986):

.although Barrett Browning produced the largest and most historically significant body of political poetry of any major Victorian poet, her political poems remain almost completely unrepresented in the canon of standard Victorian poetic works, and in studies of the political poetry of the period.

As mentioned above, her poems reflected many significant issues concerning women and children; nonetheless all these poems were not represented as the standards of political poetry of the Victorian period. Therefore, there is a need for further investigation to unveil her energetic poetical protest and anguish through rereading and redefining her poems. It is also worth noting that her poems can be sources for generating the wisdom of the peaceful protest against exploitation, slavery, child labour and gender inequalities.

Major Socio-Political Reform in the Victorian Era

- In 1832 reform act allowing the right of vote to the most of the middle class men.
- 1833 the abolishment of slavery and regulation of the child work in factories.
- 1834 modifications of poor Law applied a system of work house.
- 1845 women begin attending universities and London University in particular.
- 1871 the trade union Act allowing laborers legally organize to protect their rights.

Many movements in the Victorian era called for justice, freedom as well as strong moral values as opposing to greediness, exploitation, cynicism and inequality. Consequently, many Victorian poets used word as a tool to highlight social injustice and political reform including modifications of systems of workhouse, the right of women education, slavery and organization of trade unions.

Social and Political Reform

Social reform is one of the significant issues that the reformation movement has focused on. Hence, it is advisably significant to provide protection for women and children. Therefore, many writers of the Victorian reign handled to write reflecting their condemnation of the child work, at the time; children were brutally abused working in factories and mines, as well as women were treated as incompetent workers when compared with men and their rights were violated. Consequently, many feminist movements were started to emerge to provide care and protection. The first feminist campaign in Britain for protection of a wife's property after marriage had played a part in the creation of social science association, and had brought it female adherents from the outset" Goldman, Lawrence (2002).

The role of female Bible mission suggests as cited in Rose, Anita (2008) pointed out that something in the machinery charity has become unfastened. There is an explicit reference is the gulf between the social classes, in order to bridge that gulf, the task was to restore the organic ties that had once subsisted between rich and poor. The visiting societies sent out lady volunteers to frequent the homes of the poor and offer their advice, their prayers and their companionship. There is another movement known as settlement movement, also tried to create community between the classes as educated men and women of the middle class took up residence in East London and engaged their neighborhoods in a variety of intellectual and practical enterprises, were modern innovative methods to recover what they considered the traditional social purpose of charity.

Questions of the Study

- To what extent Elizabeth Browning's poetry reveal her political and social reform ideas?
- What are the major issues expressed in her two poems incited the public opinion?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the objectives of this study, two selected poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning were analyzed. Namely, "The Cry of the Children" in which she pictured the suffering of the working child in factories and mines. And 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point, through which she explored to the audience the bad treatment of slaves in North America and implied savage exploitation of the white women.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

In her poem "The Cry of the Children, Browning expressed her grief and antidote of industrialization consequences; specifically the child work. Through this poem, Browning attacked strongly on industrialization, because this poem was written at the time in which, the bad condition and suffering of the workers in factories and mines was increasingly condemned and concerned by many active groups. Some of the key issues concerning workers were the lack of basic facilities of safety, bad and poor food as well as the expansion of slum areas where they lived. Cawley, Nora (1941) explains the situation in which Elizabeth wrote this poem:

She wrote "The Cry of the Children" in 1842 to hasten legislation which was slow to alleviate the intensity of the prevailing suffering. She based her statement on facts, for this poem was inspired by the Parliamentary reports of her friend Richard Hengist Horne. On August 7, 1843.

When Elizabeth Browning was exposed to the worse conditions of the working children which were reflected in the report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children and young Adults in coal mines and factories, she started the campaign of raising awareness through her political poems. David (1985) pointed out that for the first time Elizabeth Browning reveals her feelings of anger and outrage as well as her indignation regarding the bad conditions of working children. She believed, these children are forced to work and endure in the mines and manufactories, under economic progress reasons which were regarded by her as illogical justifications. The cry of the Children is the manifestation of the fight against child exploitation and rendering of social legal protection against child abuse and political cover. The provision of social protest has impacted on the public opinion and enforced many political parties to act against the child work.

In the following lines Browning reflected the terrifying abuse and suffering of the working child: Browning "The Cry of The Children"(1-7)

*DO ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,*

In the above lines, Browning pictured the horrific situation of children and the child abuse in the coal mines. As if she was blaming the parents for throwing their children to this hardship and suffering. She inquires and searches for answers while the young animals are running and birds are singing and bleating and our children are crying and leaning on the streets. Here, she urges the parents and adults to protest and stop abusing children and stop child work instead children should go to schools and lead happy interesting childhood life.

The young flowers are blowing toward the west: / But the young, young children, O my brothers,/ They are weeping bitterly!// They are weeping in the playtime of the others,/ In the country of the free. Browning (8-12)

The above lines demonstrate the crucial situation that children were facing in the Victorian era, particularly during the industrial revolution. Children were used to work in the factories and coal mines for long hours. In these lines, she dismantles the arduous situation that children were in. she is urging and protesting that children are weeping and they cannot stop their tears while animals are running freely and birds are singing and playing in their nests and young flowers are swinging left and right. But, our children are suffering and weeping in the time, where even animal and other natural beings are playing. In this country where, we claim that it is free country.

Through the strong condemnation of the children situation in the factories, which was reflected in the poem The Cry of the Children, many public organizations took actions and made objections against this act. This poem touched the hearts of the people because; the words are coming out from a heart of a woman, who represents as the mother for the working children. This view is also believed by (G. Gilfillan, P.247) who stated that:

*Mrs. Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Children which called the
attention of the public to the cruel conditions under which children worked
in the factories and mines. Eventually it helped to diminish social
oppression because the cry of a factory child coming through a woman's
heart went to the nation's heart.*

The cry of the children is basically dedicated as protest poem of working children or child labor chiefly in the coal mines and factories after the industrial revolution during the era of the queen Victoria. In this poem, Browning defended the rights of the children to pursue their lives normally; hence she is urging the wise adults to take stand concerning this issue. She was encouraging adults to help young children to stop abuse and working exploitation, reminding the adults to hinder this kind of exploitation, because they themselves would not have accepted this kind of abuse in their childhood. Browning sentiment and pity for the working child is derived from the fact that children are deprived of their innocence.

Through the above discussion, Browning in her poem (The Cry of the Children), initiated a new trend in dealing with many political issues through poetry. Hence, many political activists and parties were motivated and used their powers against child labor. Furthermore, she was able to achieve her goal in upraising the public opinion through the power of the words of poetry.

The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point

The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point is a reaction against which is known as the dogma of some greedy hypocrites, who enslaved their fellow humans for self interest. The reaction was mainly on their bad treatment and the

worse situation of slaves including men, women and even their children were under the white masters' control that behaved arrogantly and acted severely against any rebellion. Hence, this poem initiated from political origins and particularly when Barrett Browning received an invitation from abolition of slavery gift book "The Liberty Bell" here this poem got a significant reconsideration from many critics. As stated by Miller, J. McNeill (2014)

With its overtly political origins—it was Barrett Browning's response to an invitation she received from abolitionists associated with the American antislavery gift book the Liberty Bell in 1845—"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" began to receive renewed interest from critics in the 1980s, as scholars turned to its "blunt and shocking" subject matter to render explicit the radical potential of Barrett Browning's poetry.

The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's point is an anti-slavery poem; in which, Elizabeth Browning employs maternal and domestic suffering to protest against black slavery in general and white women slavery (exploitation and seduction). In this poem, Barrett Browning reflects her anguish towards slave trade in North America. Brock, Claire (2000) pointed out that (although the source of the Barrett fortune -- the exploitation of slave labour in the Jamaican sugar plantations -- would continue to rankle with Barrett Browning and to inform her poetry throughout her life.) There is a kind of connection between Barrett Browning family history and slaves. This link is as a result of working black slaves on their family sugar plantation. Through her family history with slaves, she was saturated with suffering and the ugly greedy exploitation of the black slaves. This action generated in her the sense of protest and challenge to stop in the face of the slavery through poetry.

This poem is not only antislavery, but also represents the mouth piece of women liberation, rights and gender equality. At that time, many parties of the Victorian era believed that women should not indulge themselves in the world of politics. There was no equality between men and women in many aspects of the Victorian society. Including education, the right of voting and child care in case of divorce. In 1980s, Leighton and Mermin cited in Angelides, Anastasia (2015) pointed out that this poem, to some extent reflects Elizabeth Browning's relationship with her father. Hence, killing of a child by the slave mother symbolizes her rebellion against the oppression forced on her concerning the issue of writing political poetry, bearing in the mind her father's opposition of writing political poetry by women.(p:272)

In this poem, she used slave women to narrate her poem. The slave woman is running away from her master to escape the anguish, pain and agony of slavery. The pilgrims point here, in fact refers to Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, a place where the pilgrims landed in the year 1620. Ficke, Sarah (2013) stated that:

"Barrett Browning's choice to make the slave women the first-person narrator of her own story allows for a forceful indictment of the slave system that also reflects the complex and conflicted feelings of a woman who is in the process of working through a series of choices severely circumscribed by that system".

The narrator of Barrett Browning inclined to establish her intimate relation at first stance by her own choice, but unfortunately, her romantic movements was hindered by the white man assassination of her beloved and followed by raping her. This scene is intentionally revealed by Barrett Browning to show the brutality of slavery and how women loses her dignity in the face of slavery and how harmful of being slave. The assaulters not only rape this woman, but also they did not permit her express her protest for the ugly act. This may be due to their not respecting her gender, as well as her social status. The following lines will demonstrate:

In the open ground, /between the canes, / He said 'I love you' as he passed;
Where the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains, / I heard how he vowed it
fast. /While others trembled, he sate in the hut /And carved me a bowl of the
cocoa-nut /Through the roar of the hurricanes. Browning (71-77)

The above lines reflect the slave woman's love to another slave. The next lines will give the audience how this love relationship was terminated by the white men by murdering her lover. The murder of the male slave reflects how brutally slaves were treated, they were killed simply like any beast but not human. The narrator habitually uses the phrase "we were black" to remind the readers that they are not treated like the whites. Consequently, they were killed only because they were black:

*We were black, we were black! /We had no claim to love and bliss; What
marvel, ours was cast to wrack? / They wrung my cold hands out of his,---
They dragged him---where? I crawled to touch /His blood's mark in the dust---
not much, Ye pilgrim-souls,---though plain as this! Browning (92-98)*

When the slave woman became pregnant by the rape; considered as shameful in the poem, although there is no anyone brave enough to take rape or bringing illegal child through it, as a shameful behavior in the real community at the time. The above lines are strongly reflecting the anguish situation of the slave and greediness of its practitioners. The lines also identify the suffering of the slaves and how their life was frugal in the hands of the Whiteman. Because each child born from slave women whether the father is another slave or the master, the child is to be born as slave according the law of slavery at that time. Therefore, the child is not exempt from harsh labor and racial injustice and social prejudice.

And my own child! I could not bear /To look in his face, it was so white; /I covered him
up with a kerchief rare, / I covered his face in, close and tight: /And he moaned and
struggled, as well might be, /For the white child wanted his liberty--- Browning(121-126)

As a result of this rape was a too white baby, who was unbearable for the slave, since the child's face is similar to the master's. This made the slave women to commit infanticide, and murdered the child with her own hands. She buried the child and become reconciled with the dead child. Barrett Browning intentionally created this scene to protest against the worse treatment of the slaves and black people in America. The treatment reached to a point, which forces a mother to infanticide her own baby by her own hands, surely is very tragic situation that lets people to commit this kind of actions. Throughout the whole poem, the slave mother (narrator) sporadically shouts " I am Black, I am Black!". The repetition of

the same expression may denote her inner suffering and antagonism from being treated badly or even could be an answer for her enquiry of why other people are living healthy good life and the black Americans are not. This is the agony and outrage from the slave situation and harmfulness of being a slave.

Elizabeth Battles (1991) cited in Angelides, Anastasia (2015) "builds on the idea that the poet forces her reader to confront completely the horrific ramifications of human bondage by contracting the entire slave experience into actions of desperate mother"(p: 272). Barrett Browning used the technique of influencing her audience through the use of poetry as a tool for social mobilization and political protest to make changes possible in the Victorians life. Despite the whole poem is dedicated to a single slave mother, rather than the experience of the slaves in general, but could be considered as a reflection of suffering and anger of all slaves. In this way, she becomes able to react against slavery and child work. Elizabeth Browning used the power of poetry to raise the awareness of the people, and preach her believes among the public opinion to press the politicians to take action against the controversial issues such as slavery, child work and women exploitations.

CONCLUSIONS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning used poetry as a tool for social protest and political reform. The two poems were strongly provided grounds for reformation and establishing foot for basic human rights. Basically, child labour and black slavery in North America as well as white women exploitation in Europe, was the essential issue in her two poems. Through "The Cry of the Children" she upraised public awareness of the child labour in the mines and manufactures and their terrible condition in which they work. Consequently, many public organizations took stand against children exploitation in the name of industrial development or for the sake of the welfare of the society. In doing so, she succeeded in urging the public against the miserable images of children which were caused in the name of industrial revolution. The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point, on the other hand portrayed the suffering of the black slave in North America. Through this poem, Elizabeth Browning urged her audience to protest and reject the horrific situations of slaves. She also implicitly tackled the issue of white women abuse and exploitation and her own rejection of treating women differently by using gender discrimination. Consequently, her two poems played very important role in the social mobilization and raised public awareness on the issues concerning the major political dilemma such as slavery and child labour. Many movements appeared until the declaration of the reform act in 1833, which deals with the abolishment of slavery and regulation of the child work in factories.

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